The Vesuvius Club

Mark Gatiss

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I

MR LUCIFER BOX ENTERTAINS

I HAVE always been an appalling judge of character. It is my most beguiling virtue.

What, then, did I make of the Honourable Everard Supple whose likeness I was conjuring on to canvas in my studio that sultry July evening?

He was an imposing cove of sixty-odd, built like a pugilist, who had made a fortune in the diamond mines of the Cape. His declining years, he'd told me during the second sitting – when a client begins to thaw a mite – were to be devoted entirely to pleasure, principally in the gaming houses of the warmer and naughtier parts of Europe. A portrait, in his opinion (and his absence), would be just the thing to hang over the vast baronial fireplace in the vast baronial hall he had recently lavished a hundred thou' upon.



The Supples, it has to be said, were not amongst the oldest and most distinguished families in the realm. Only one generation back from the Honourable Everard had been the less than honourable Gerald who had prospered only tolerably in a manufactory of leather thumb-braces. Son and heir had done rather better for himself and now to add to the title (of sorts) and the fake coat of arms being busily prepared across town he had his new portrait. This, he told me with a wheezy chuckle, would convey the required air of old-world veracity. And if my painting were any good (that *hurt*), perhaps I might even be interested in knocking up a few carefully aged canvases of his ancestors?

Supple blinked repeatedly, as was his habit, one lid lingering over his jade-irised glass eye (the left one) as I let myself imagine him tramping into the studio in doublet and hose, all in the name of family honour.

He cleared his throat with a grisly expectoration and I realized he'd been addressing me. I snapped out of my reverie and peeped around the side of the canvas. I've been told I peep rather well.

'I do beg your pardon, I was absorbed in the curve of your earlobes.'

'I was suggesting dinner, sir,' said Supple, flipping a half-hunter watch from his waistcoat. 'To celebrate the successful conclusion of me picture.'

'I should be delighted,' I lied. 'But I feel it only right to warn you that I have a peculiar horror of artichokes.'

The Honourable Everard Supple rose from the doubtful Louis Quinze into which I'd plonked him, sending a whisper of paint-flakes to the dust-sheeted floor.

'We might try me club, then,' he suggested, brushing the sleeve of his frock-coat. 'Or do you have somewhere you artistic-types favour?'

I rose and ran one of my long, bony hands through my hair. They *are* long, white and bony, I cannot deny it, but very fine. Waistcoat and face flecked with paint, I shrugged.

'As a matter of fact, I do,' I said. 'Charming little spot in Rosebery Avenue. Come back at eight and we'll drive over.' So saying, I suddenly turned the easel on its squeaking castors, revealing the portrait to the golden light washing through the skylight. 'Behold! Your immortality!'

Supple creaked forward on his expensive boots and fixed a monocle, rather unnecessarily, into the orbit of his false eye. He frowned, cocked his head to left and right and grimaced.

'Well, I suppose you get what you pay for, eh, Mr Box?'

My name is Lucifer Box, but I imagine you know that. Whether these scribblings eventually form the core of my memoirs or are found secreted in oilskin wrappers at the bottom of a lavatory cistern years after my demise, I have no doubt that, by the time you read this, I will be most terribly famous.

I handed Supple his soft kid-gloves with as much brusqueness as I could muster. 'You don't like it?'

The old fool shrugged. 'Just not sure it's terribly like me.'

I helped him into his overcoat. 'On the contrary, sir, I believe I have caught you.'

I smiled what my friends call, naturally enough, the smile of Lucifer.

Ah! London in the summertime! *Hellish*, as any resident will tell you. Even in those first few innocent years of the new century it smelled of roasting excrement. So it was with 'kerchiefs pressed to mouths that Supple and I entered the dining rooms I had selected. They were alarmingly unfashionable but, in the long light of dusk, the white-panelled plainness could have been called Vermeeresque. Not by me, you understand. A flypaper above the hearth twisted lazily, amber and black like a screw of ear-wax.

This place, I told Supple, was owned and run by a woman called Delilah whose crippled daughter I had once painted as a favour.

'She was not, perhaps, the bonniest thing,' I confided as we settled down to eat. 'Lost both hands to a wasting disease and had them replaced with wooden ones. And – oh! – her little legs were in horrid iron rings.' I shook my head despairingly. 'Ought to have been exposed at birth, her father said.'

'Nay!' cried Supple.

'Aye! But her dear mother loved the little mite. When I came to paint the portrait I did my best to make little Ida look like an angel. Prophetically enough. Though it turned out she had some pluck.'

Supple wiped soup from his pinkish lips. Sentimental old Victorian that he was, a tear sprang to his one good eye. Most probably the Death of Little Nell had been like mother's milk to him.

'Poor Ida,' I sighed, picking idly at a chicken leg. 'Grabbed from her bath-chair by a gang of dacoits and sold into bondage.'

Supple's shook his head mournfully. No doubt an image of the doe-eyed cripple had flashed into his silly old brain. His fingers tightened on the fish-knife. 'Go on. What happened?'

'She made a bolt for it, God bless her,' I continued. 'Took off across the rooftops with the fiends in hot pursuit.'

Blink-blink. The jade glass eye regarded me steadily. 'And then?'

I closed my eyes and steepled my fingers. 'She got as far as Wapping before her brittle little legs gave out. She fell through the roof of a sugar merchant's and into a vat of treacle. Of course, with those wooden hands she could get no purchase on the rim and she drowned. Very, very slowly.'

Drinking the last of an indifferent burgundy with an air of finality, I clapped my hands and turned the conversation towards more cheerful matters. Now I had Supple's trust, it was time to betray that of others. I wanted the practice.

I regaled Supple with what I know to be an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes (not many of them true, certainly not the best ones) concerning the greatish and goodish who have paid yours truly not nearly enough to be immortalized in oils.

'You are very indiscreet, sir,' laughed the old man, cheering up. 'I am glad not to have confided any of my secrets in you!'

I smiled my wide smile.

Supple, for his part, talked at length about his time in South Africa and the great adventure a young man like me might have there. He told me about his own daughter – a great joy to the old man by his account – and I nodded and smiled with the air of sagacity I like to assume for such occasions. I put on a good show of being fascinated by his colourful account of dawn over the Transvaal as I took out my watch and stared at the second hand racing over the porcelain dial. I could hear the soft action of the tiny spring.

It was midway between the fish course and the pudding, as Supple opened his mouth to begin another interminable tale, that I did the decent thing and shot him.

A stain spread across the breast of his stiff white waistcoat like poppy petals emerging through the snow. How I wish I'd had my sketch-book with me! The scene was a riot of crimson possibilities.

There, now. I've shocked you, haven't I? What the deuce can Mr Box be up to? Are customers in such abundant supply? Well, you'll just have to be patient. All good things et cetera.

Supple's face, never particularly smashing as you may have gathered, froze in an expression of pained surprise and a little bubble of red spit frolicked over his lips. He slid forward on to the table where his teeth met the rim of his pudding bowl with a shocking crack, like the knees of an out-of-practice supplicant.

I watched smoke curl from the end of the snub-barrelled pistol I'd used, then replaced the weapon under a jelly mould – silver and shaped like a sleeping hare – where it had been until recently ensconced.

Lighting a cigarette, I re-pocketed my watch and, rising, dabbed a napkin at the corners of my full-lipped mouth (it's a very pretty mouth – more of it later). Taking up a dessert spoon, I dug it into Supple's left socket and carefully removed the old fellow's glass eye. It popped out with just a little poking and lay nestled in my palm like a gull's egg. I looked at the iris and smiled. It was just the shade of green I had in mind for a new tie and now I had a match for my tailor. What a happy accident! I slipped the eye into my waistcoat and draped the napkin carelessly over the dead man's head.

A large and ugly mirror hung over the fireplace of the dark little room. I checked my appearance in it (*very* acceptable), adjusting my stance to avoid the mottled edges of the glass, which tended to obscure the wonderful cut of my best tail-coat and pulled the tatty bell-rope that hung close by.

The doors were opened almost at once by a huge woman in a daffodil-coloured frock. Her gin-flushed cheeks, abutting a long, blotchy nose gave her face the appearance of bruised knackers in a harness.

'Good evening, Delilah,' I said, with just the slightest turn from the mirror.

'Hevening, sir,' said the drudge. She shuffled a little awkwardly, glanced at the table and cleared her throat.

'Heverything in horder, sir?'

I turned, cigarette between teeth, adjusting my white tie with both hands.

'Hmm? Oh yes. The burgundy was deadly and the partridge a trifle high. Other than that a most satisfactory evening.'

Delilah nodded her massive head. 'And the hother gentleman, sir?'

'Will be leaving us now, thank you.'

Delilah thrust both mitt-like hands under the armpits of the Honourable Everard Supple and dragged the one-eyed corpse with apparent effortlessness towards the doors. I hopped athletically over the dead man's legs, sweeping up my cloak and topper from a chair.

'How's little Ida?' I asked, clapping the hat to my head.

'Very good, thankyou for hasking, sir. No doubt be seeing you soon, sir,' grunted Delilah.

'No doubt,' I replied. 'Ta, ta.'

I stepped over the threshold of the mean little dwelling and out into the sultry evening. Thinking I deserved a little treat, I hailed a hansom.

'The Pomegranate Rooms,' I said to the driver. Work was over for the moment. Time to play.

Twenty minutes later, I was dropped a short distance from said night-spot and made my way towards its mouldering wedding-cake façade. The slattern on the door opened it a crack and treated me to a quick view of her form. Poured carelessly into a garish oriental gown she had the look of a pox-ravaged sultana – both the potentess and the dried fruit.

I slipped through the grimy doorway.

'Any riff-raff in tonight, my sweet?' I enquired.

'Plenty,' she gurgled, taking my hat and cloak as persons on doors are wont to do.

'Splendid!'

The Pomegranate Rooms were small, sweltering and poorly lit by gas sconces stained tobacco-yellow, lending the whole a colour

not unlike the bitter pith of the titular fruit. Rickety wooden tables littered the crimson carpets; spilled champagne formed great fizzing puddles in every shadowed corner. Each table was occupied by rather more patrons than was good for it; the majority of the sweating men in evening dress, or the remains of it, with a quantity of backless white waistcoats slung over the chairs; the women, and there were many of them, less respectably dressed, some scarcely dressed at all. It was all quite ghastly and I was very fond of it.

Such establishments erupt on to the bloated body of the capital with the unerring regularity of a clap-rash but the Pomegranate Rooms were something of a special case. A hangover from the fever-dream that had been the Naughty Nineties, I had once, within its stuffy, cigar-fume-drenched walls, espied our present monarch being 'attended to' by a French noblewoman of uncertain virtue.

I dropped into a chair at the only free table and ordered up some plonk. A fat bawd close by, rouged like an *ingénue* undertaker's first case, began at once to make eyes at me. I examined my nails until she lost interest. I cannot abide the obese and in a whore it is surely tantamount to unprofessionalism. Her chums were not much better.

I ate something to take away the taste of the champagne and then smoked a cigarette to take away the taste of the food. I tried not to make it too obvious that I was on my lonesome. It is a terrible thing to dine alone. One stinks of desperation.

With as much nonchalance as I could affect, I examined the play of the light on my champagne glass whilst surreptitiously sneaking looks at the patrons in the hope of spotting something pretty.

And then, without any ado whatsoever, a young woman glided into the seat opposite me. In a white satin dress with pearls at her throat and rather gorgeous blonde hair piled high she looked like one of Sargent's slightly elongated females. I felt a stir down below that could have been the beginnings of indigestion but probably had more to do with the way her dewy eyes were fixed on me.

I lifted the plonk bottle and my eyebrows enquiringly.

'You're rather out of place here, my dear,' I said, as I poured her a glass. 'I should say the Pomegranate Rooms rarely see the likes of you.'

She inclined her head slightly. 'Got any fags?'

A little taken aback, I nodded and took out my cigarette case. It is flat and well-polished with my initials in Gothic script upon it, yet it has never been called upon to save my life by absorbing the impact of a bullet. That's what servants are for.

'Armenian or Georgian?' I enquired.

She took out one of the long black specimens that cram the case's right-hand side and struck a match off the heel of her elegant shoe, lighting the cigarette in one rapid movement.

Her brazen behaviour delighted me.

'Lor, I was dying for that,' said the vision, taking in great gulps of smoke. 'Mind if I take one for later?'

I waved a hand. 'Be my guest.'

She scooped up a dozen or so cigarettes and stuffed them inside her corset.

'You're full of surprises,' I managed.

'Ain't I, though?' She laughed and gave a hoarse cough. 'You on your own?'

My performance had been penetrated. I poured myself another drink. 'Alas.'

She looked me up and down with what I can only describe as sauciness. 'That's a shame. You're a looker.'

I could not deny it.

'I like a tall gent,' she continued. 'You a foreigner?'

I ran a hand through my long black hair. 'My complexion owes much to my Franco-Slavic mama and little to my British papa. My waist is all my own work.'

'Hm. They must've been proud of having such a bonny babe.'

'A baroness once told me that she could cut her wrists on my cheek-bones.'

'Lot of girls died for you have they?'

'Only those who cannot live for me.'

She rested her chin on a gloved hand. 'You got cold eyes, though. Blue as poison-bottles.'

'Really, you must desist or I shall consider running away with myself.' I placed my hand on hers. 'What's your name?'

She shook her head, blowing out a cloud of smoke and smiling. 'I don't like mine. I'd much rather hear yours.'

I fiddled lightly with my cuff-link. 'Gabriel,' I said, adopting one of my *noms de guerre*. 'Gabriel Ratchitt.'

The nameless lovely took this in. 'That's an angel's name.'

'I know, my dear,' came my murmur. 'And I fear I may be falling.'